

The Effect of Regulatory Focus and Delay Type on Consumers' Reactions to Delay

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at examining the joint impact of regulatory focus and delay type on consumers' reactions to waits in a restaurant context. Based on both positive and negative utilities of a delay, the current study predicted that promotion-focused people will react more positively toward a delay than prevention-focused people. In addition, previous studies on delay type have generated opposite results based on two theoretical models. To reconcile these mixed findings, the current study added regulatory focus as a moderator and predicted that field theory is more salient in predicting promotion-focused customers' responses whereas expectancy model is more salient in predicting prevention-focused customers' responses.

Key Words: *Regulatory Focus, Delay Type, Expectancy Model, Field Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Unlike consumer goods, the benefits of service encounters are delivered and consumed during the service process. Thus, although a delay can be time-consuming, annoying and frustrating, in some service situations an imposed delay seems to be almost unavoidable. For example, the productivity of a restaurant kitchen is almost fixed, but consumers may arrive at the restaurant in a less predictable fashion, thus waiting in restaurants is common and hard to eliminate.

Regulatory focus theory proposed that people use different systems to regulate pains and pleasures (Higgins, 1996). People with promotion focus are motivated to pay attention to positive outcomes: they try to maximize the presence of positive outcomes and minimize the absence of positive outcomes; on the other hand, people with prevention focus are motivated to focus on negative outcomes: they want to maximize the absence of negative outcomes and minimize the presence of negative outcomes. Although both systems are adaptive and all people possess both systems, different socialization experiences may make one system predominate. Thus, for service managers, it's reasonable to know their customers' regulatory orientation (e.g. previous studies suggested that Eastern Asian tend to have prevention focus rather than promotion focus).

Dube-Rioux (1989) proposed three types of delay based on the stage of the service encounter during which a delay occurs: a pre-process delay is the delay happened in a phase

from a customer's arrival at the restaurant until he or she gets a table; an in-process delay occurs in the phase that includes placing orders and consuming the meal; a post-process delay is the delay during the final stage of service encounter from paying the bill until the customer leaves the restaurant. Several scholars examined the three types of delay in different service settings, (Dube-Rioux, 1989; Dube, Schmitt and Leclerc, 1991a; Dube, Schmitt and Leclerc, 1991b; Hui, Thakor and Gill, 1998), however, conflict results were generated based on two theoretical models. Field theory (Lewin's, 1943) predicts that perceived waiting time should be longer, and affective response should be more negative during the pre-process and post-process delay rather than in-process delay. On the other hand, expectancy model (Cahoon and Edmonds, 1980) suggests opposite result that a delay happened during an in-process stage should be more irritating than a delay in pre-process or post-process stage.

In Nowlis, Mandel and McCabe's (2004) study, they explored two utility dimensions of a consumption experience after an imposed delay: the positive utility of the pleasant event itself and the negative utility of the waiting period. Thus, the purpose of the present article is to 1) examine how regulatory orientations influence consumers' reactions after an imposed delay based on the two utility dimensions proposed by Nowlis et al. (2004); 2) Apply the regulatory focus theory to delay type and explore how do consumers with different regulatory orientations respond differently to different delay situation.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Regulatory Focus and Delay

Previous studies suggest that a delay may either increase anxiety and stress or increase the positive effects of anticipating a pleasant experience. Nowlis et al. (2004) provided empirical evidence that the utility of a consumption experience is composed of the utility of the event itself (positive) and the utility of the wait (negative), and they found that the degree to which one of these two factors exerts a greater weight than the other depends on characteristics of the decision task. In the current article, I contend that an individual's regulatory orientation may also influence his/her response to an imposed delay.

During an imposed delay, both a positive outcome (anticipation of the pleasant consumption experience) and a negative outcome (anxiety caused by wait) are present. According to Higgins (1996, 2002), people with a promotion orientation will focus on positive outcomes and treat positive outcomes as more important in their decision making process than negative outcomes; whereas the reverse is true for people with prevention orientation. Thus, when facing with an imposed delay, people with a promotion orientation will mainly focus on the anticipation dimension and treat it as more important than the wait itself, thus generating more positive affective responses, whereas the reverse is true for people with prevention orientation. In addition, previous studies suggest that one's mood usually influences the service evaluation (Taylor, 1994), thus, the affective response could bias the service evaluation in the same direction.

H 1: People with a prevention focus will have *a)* more negative affective response and *b)* lower service evaluation after an imposed delay than those with a promotion focus.

Interaction between Regulatory Focus and Delay Type

Dube-Rioux (1989) proposed three types of delay based on the stage of the service encounter during which a delay occurs: a *pre-process delay* occurs between the customer's arrival at the restaurant until he/she gets a table; an *in-process delay* occurs in the phase that includes placing orders and consuming the meal; a *post-process delay* is the delay during the final stage from paying the bill to the customer leaving the restaurant. In the service industry, consumption goals are usually achieved at the end of the in-process stage and the post-process stage could be perceived as a pre-process stage of consumer's next goal achievement (e.g. go to a movie after the dinner). Thus, I treat the post-process stage as a pre-process stage in the present study. Several scholars examined the three types of delay in different service settings, (Dube-Rioux, 1989; Dube et al., 1991a; Dube et al., 1991b; Hui et al., 1998); however, the results are mixed. .

According to the *Field theory* (Lewin's, 1943), when an individual is further from the goal state, a considerable amount of psychological force pushes the individual forward and makes him/her anxious; however, when the individual is in the goal region, the psychological forces have eased. Thus, the field theory predicts that perceived waiting time should be longer, and affective response should be more negative during the pre-process and post-process delay rather than in-process delay. In fact, the field theory focuses on the positive outcomes of a delay or the anticipation of pleasant goal achievement (Nowlis et al. 2004), and it measures the distance to the goal state and predicts the psychological reaction based on the strength of pleasant anticipation. Since people with a promotion orientation will focus on positive outcomes and treat positive outcomes as highly salient in their decision, I expect that the field theory is more salient in predicting promotion-focused customers' responses after a delay than prevention-focused customers' responses.

H 2: People with a promotion focus will have *a)* more negative affective responses and *b)* lower service evaluation after a pre-process or post-process delay than an in-process delay.

On the other hand, the *expectancy model* (Cahoon and Edmonds, 1980) suggests that a delay happening during an in-process stage should be more irritating than a delay in the pre-process or post-process stage because one's attention to the passage of time is heightened when a delay occurs close to the goal state. Usually the amount of effort people invested will increase during the process of goal attainment. Thus, a delay that occurs close to the goal state will generate stronger commitment and lead to more negative feelings (anxiety, stress) than a delay that occurs further from the goal state (Hui et al. 1998). Based on the two utility dimensions (Nowlis et al. 2004), the expectancy model focuses on the negative outcomes of a delay, the negative feelings caused by waiting, and it measures the amount of effort and how much time an individual has already invested, and predicts more negative reactions with more investments. Since people with a prevention orientation usually focus on negative outcomes and treat negative outcomes as more important in their decision, I propose that expectancy model is more salient in predicting prevention-focused customers' responses after a delay than promotion-focused customers' responses.

H 3: People with prevention focus will have a) more negative affective responses and b) lower service evaluation after an in-process delay than a pre-process or post-process delay.

METHODOLOGY

A 2 (regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) x 3 (delay type: pre-process, in-process and post-process) quasi-experimental design will be conducted. Chronic regulatory focus will be measured using the Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda's (2002) scales (see appendix). Lockwood et al.'s (2002) scales are employed because their questions best match the context of the current study which composes of presence of positive outcomes and presence of negative outcomes.

The hypotheses will be tested in three written scenarios of a service encounter in a restaurant. A restaurant setting was selected because the phases of the service process in a restaurant are relatively distinct and occur successively. Moreover, they cover the experience of the whole service (Dube'-Rioux et al. 1989). Three delay types will be manipulated in the written scenarios based on Dube'-Rioux et al.'s (1989) study.

Data will be collected in the northeast area in the U.S. To better control the occupational and social class factors, the samples are composed of university undergraduate students. The expected sample size is 180 and all the respondents will be randomly assigned to one of the three scenarios.

Realism and delay type will be asked as manipulation checks. Age, ethnicity, education level and restaurant patronage frequency will be measured as covariates. Five questions about service evaluation will be employed from Dube'-Rioux et al.'s (1989) study. Two different scales will be used to measure affective responses (Hui et al., 1998). All the measurements are on a 7-point Likert scale.

IMPLICATIONS

Imposed delays are common and seem to be almost unavoidable in service industry. For example, the productivity of a restaurant kitchen is almost fixed, but consumers may arrive at the restaurant in a less predictable fashion, or some consumers may encroach upon the service time of others, thus waiting and delay in a restaurant are common and hard to manage. However, the current study provides some useful managerial implications. The managers can get to know their consumers better including their dominant regulatory orientations through relationship marketing, and then they will have a choice to manage the delay at different service stages. For example, if an imposed delay is unavoidable and the customer has prevention-focus, the manager should let the customers sit the nice waiting area and wait for a table (pre-process delay) instead of asking them to sit in their table and wait for the food.

In addition, future study could examine the hypotheses in a cross-cultural setting. For example, Eastern Asians tend to have prevention focus whereas Westerners tend to have promotion focus (Lockwood, Marshall and Sadler, 2005). A replication of current study in a cross-cultural setting could validate the current results and provide more useful managerial

implications to international restaurant organizations.

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